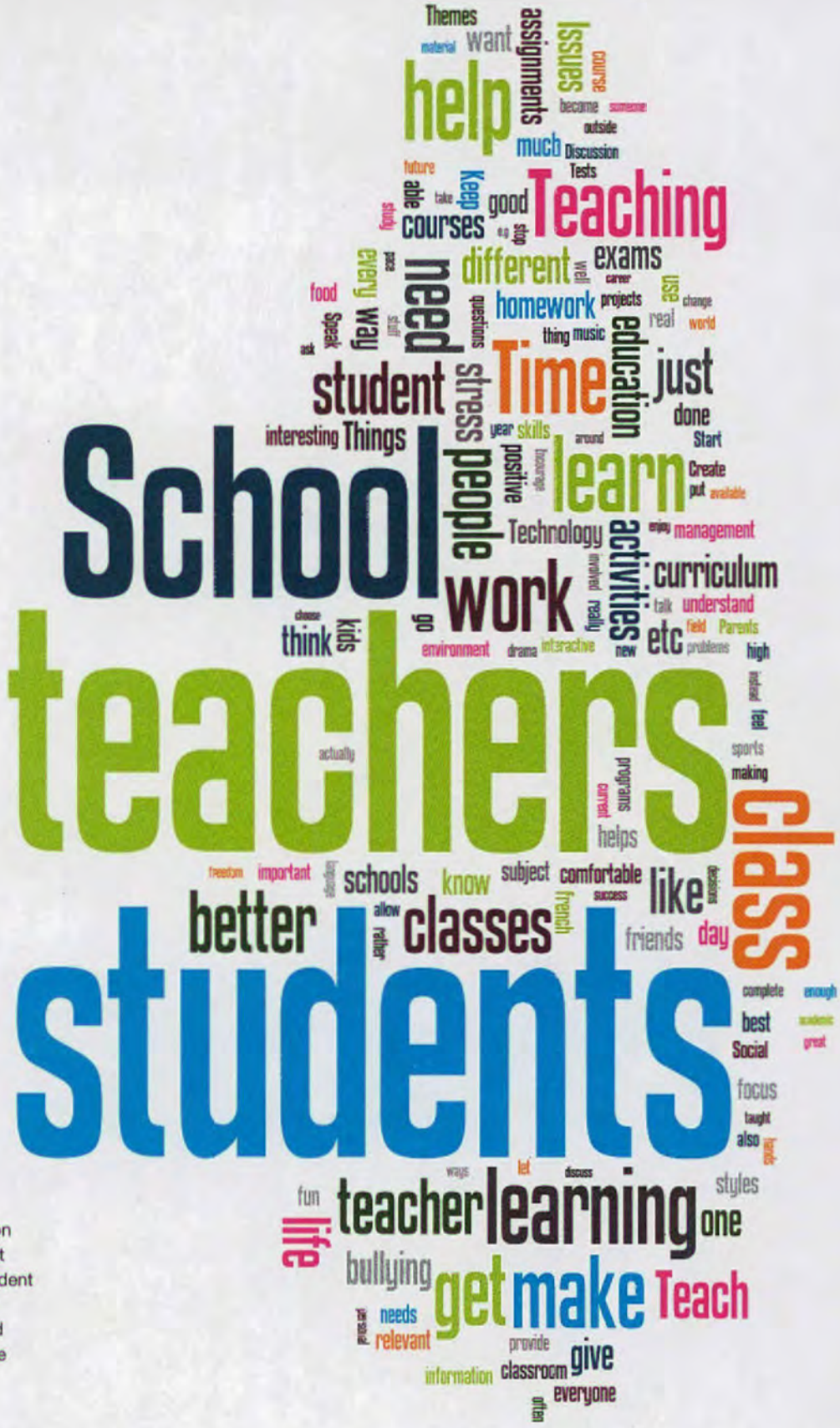
We're listening...

Year in Review 2008-09

Government of Alberta ■
Education



Disclaimer

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of Alberta youth we spoke to at the *Speak Out* forums, at the Annual Student Conference, and through the *Speak Out* website (**www.speakout.alberta.ca**) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Government of Alberta.

For more information, please contact:

***Speak Out* – the Alberta Student Engagement Initiative**
Alberta Education
12th Floor
10044 – 108 Street
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, T5J 5E6
Tel: 780.427.5459
Email: speakout@gov.ab.ca

The online Wordle Java Applet (at http://www.wordle.net) was used to create the above graphic. Wordle is a tool that generates "word clouds" from text. We used this tool to analyze over 4,600 footprint responses and 3,600 online discussions of the students. The word clouds give greater prominence to words that appear more frequently in the source text; i.e., the words in bigger fonts were mentioned more frequently than those in smaller fonts.

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Executive Summary

Speak Out – the Alberta Student Engagement Initiative, was created in response to a Government of Alberta throne speech commitment in February 2008.

"This government will not let up on its efforts to further strengthen our education system. To provide a fresh and youthful perspective on learning, the government will establish a youth advisory committee on education. This committee will explore new and innovative ways to improve the learning opportunities available to young Albertans."

The inclusion of student engagement into the Alberta Education 2009–12 Ministry Business Plan as Strategy 4.5, "Implement a student engagement initiative to create opportunities for Alberta youth to provide advice and receive information on the education system," further demonstrates the government's commitment to not only hear the student voice, but also seek it.

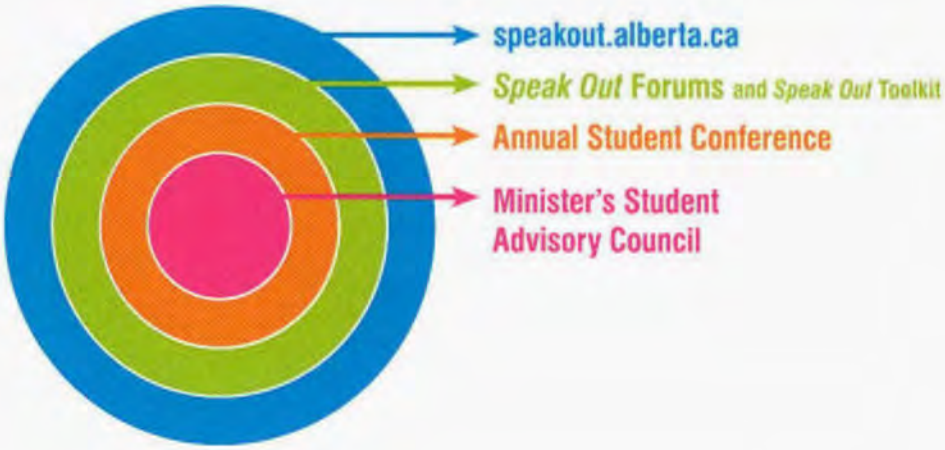
To implement an effective student engagement initiative, the *Speak Out* team researched similar initiatives across the country. All provinces and territories were contacted to identify promising practices. The team discovered that although most provinces were engaging youth and students through a combination of forums, conferences and advisory councils, no one had ventured online. It was assumed that it would be too challenging to create a safe and secure public space online for minors. However, the team also recognized that in order to effectively reach youth, we had to find them online. *Speak Out* was the first to go interactive with minors online. The Minister of Education officially launched *Speak Out* and the website on November 26, 2008.

Speak Out has created an interactive and safe place online by setting out clear expectations of scope and conduct. The discussions on the website are about education and the students' school experiences. The community rules are simple, yet effective in guiding users' behaviours. Also, the site is fully moderated. That means that nothing is posted publicly until it has been reviewed. This practice ensures that content is relevant, respectful, safe and clean. Finally, anonymity of users ensures that the discussions are honest and frank and that privacy is secured.

Online, Alberta's youth have been talking about what helps them learn. They share ideas on teaching methods that work for them, make suggestions on how to improve the curriculum and better integrate technology into their classes, and provide advice to teachers as well as to each other. A real sense of community and support has developed as these anonymous users share personal stories of stress and strategies for overcoming it. It is incredible to witness how thoughtful and respectful our online community continues to be and grow.

> "We want to hear from you if you love school. We want to hear from you if you hate school. We want to hear from you if the only reason you come to school is because of the sports, your friends or because you have watched as much trash TV as you can possibly handle. Whatever your reason, if you have been in a school, then you have an opinion and we want to hear it."

As student engagement was gaining momentum online, it was critical that the engagement continue face to face. The other three elements of *Speak Out* are the *Speak Out* forums, the Annual Student Conference and the Minister's Student Advisory Council. *Speak Out* is a multi-layered engagement framework, where students can become as active as they feel comfortable. On the periphery, students are free to learn more about the initiative on the *Speak Out* website. As they become more comfortable, students can become active in the other elements of the initiative, moving toward the centre of the bull's-eye and thereby intensifying the level of engagement.



A unique three-hour graphic facilitation process was developed and delivered at *Speak Out* forums held across the province. During the 2008–2009 launch year, the *Speak Out* team travelled more than 12,500 kilometres and reached 1,590 students at 38 *Speak Out* forums. At each forum, small groups of students were asked to discuss their educational experiences and share what is working, what is not and what can be done to make things better.

At the *Speak Out* forums, students said that when they are learning at their best, their individual learning styles are addressed through effective teaching styles in a positive learning environment. When asked what is holding them back, students pointed to disengaged and ineffective teaching styles in a distracting environment where they are presented material that isn't interesting or relevant to them. Finally, when asked what can be done to address these obstacles, students said they need to better connect with their teachers through ongoing support, evaluation and training. Students want to see improvements in their learning environment. They want a greater focus on student health and tools for self-improvement. They echoed voices we heard online, which suggested improving course material and better integrating technology into the school system. At these *Speak Out* forums, the team made a concerted effort to engage students and youth from the various educational systems in Alberta, including public, separate, private, charter and francophone schools. We sought diverse perspectives and experiences by engaging rural, urban, Northern, First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI), at-risk and immigrant youth. The *Speak Out* forums were an incredible opportunity to let students know they have a voice and that we not only want to hear it, but need to hear it.

The first Annual Student Conference was held on May 3 and 4, 2009, in Edmonton. This event was the culmination of thousands of student voices that were heard at *Speak Out* forums and shared online. Students generated more than 4,600 ideas at the *Speak Out* forums and contributed over 3,800 posts online. The *Speak Out* team analyzed the student contributions and organized them into 25 broad themes. At the conference, students worked through these themes and drafted recommendations for further consideration.

A number of common issues emerged around improving student-teacher interaction and fostering stronger relationships, providing more opportunities for students to prepare for their future, improving evaluation and testing methods, increasing student involvement and creating an improved, personalized and healthy learning environment.

Students voiced their desire for more relevant curriculum that would allow greater freedom in course selection, with a focus on experiential learning and opportunities to explore career interests through job shadowing, counselling and university-like class schedules.

The students also recommended a positive learning atmosphere that encourages healthy lifestyles and promotes student participation and enthusiasm for learning through pep rallies, field trips, student conferences, healthy food options, more focus on sports and physical education. They emphasized the need for a learning environment where they feel safe, have high self-esteem and respect diversity. Students indicated that teachers are key facilitators in creating this safe space and need to be empowered and trained to do so.

Equally compelling were the recommendations for improved learning, which included a better assessment and evaluation system that would provide alternatives to traditional testing and pay more attention to diverse learning styles.

Overall, the student-generated recommendations demonstrated that students have a keen understanding of what is important to their learning and a desire to be involved in improving their collective educational experience.

Finally, the Minister's Student Advisory Council was announced at the conference. The 24-member council included diverse representatives of the student body, from 14 to 19 years old, from across the province. The recruitment pitch for both the conference and the council was designed to reach all students, from the high-achieving to the uninterested and disengaged. The council meets with the Minister of Education a few times a year to discuss student issues, concerns and opportunities with Alberta Education. It will also host *Speak Out* forums in council members' communities and facilitate small group discussions at the second Annual Student Conference in May 2010.

> "Alberta's youth must have a voice in the decisions that affect their learning and their futures," said Minister of Education Dave Hancock. "Speak Out is an opportunity for students to tell us how we can offer education programs that are supportive, flexible and consistent with their needs."
>
> (Excerpt from November 26, 2008, Government of Alberta news release)

These four components of *Speak Out*—the interactive and fully moderated website, the facilitated focus group discussions held at *Speak Out* forums, the Annual Student Conference and the Minister's Student Advisory Council—continue to engage thousands of student voices across Alberta.

Key to the success of *Speak Out* this launch year was the intensive communications strategy. The *Speak Out* team mailed out almost 3,000 packages to various education, youth-serving and immigrant-serving organizations, including all Alberta high schools and school boards. The team leveraged numerous educational networks and made hundreds of phone calls to recruit for the Annual Student Conference and the Minister's Student Advisory Council. Communications was responsible for the innovative social marketing campaign implemented to create student awareness across the province through an aggressive online ad campaign on sites such as Facebook. This approach was bolstered by print advertisements in *Youthink*

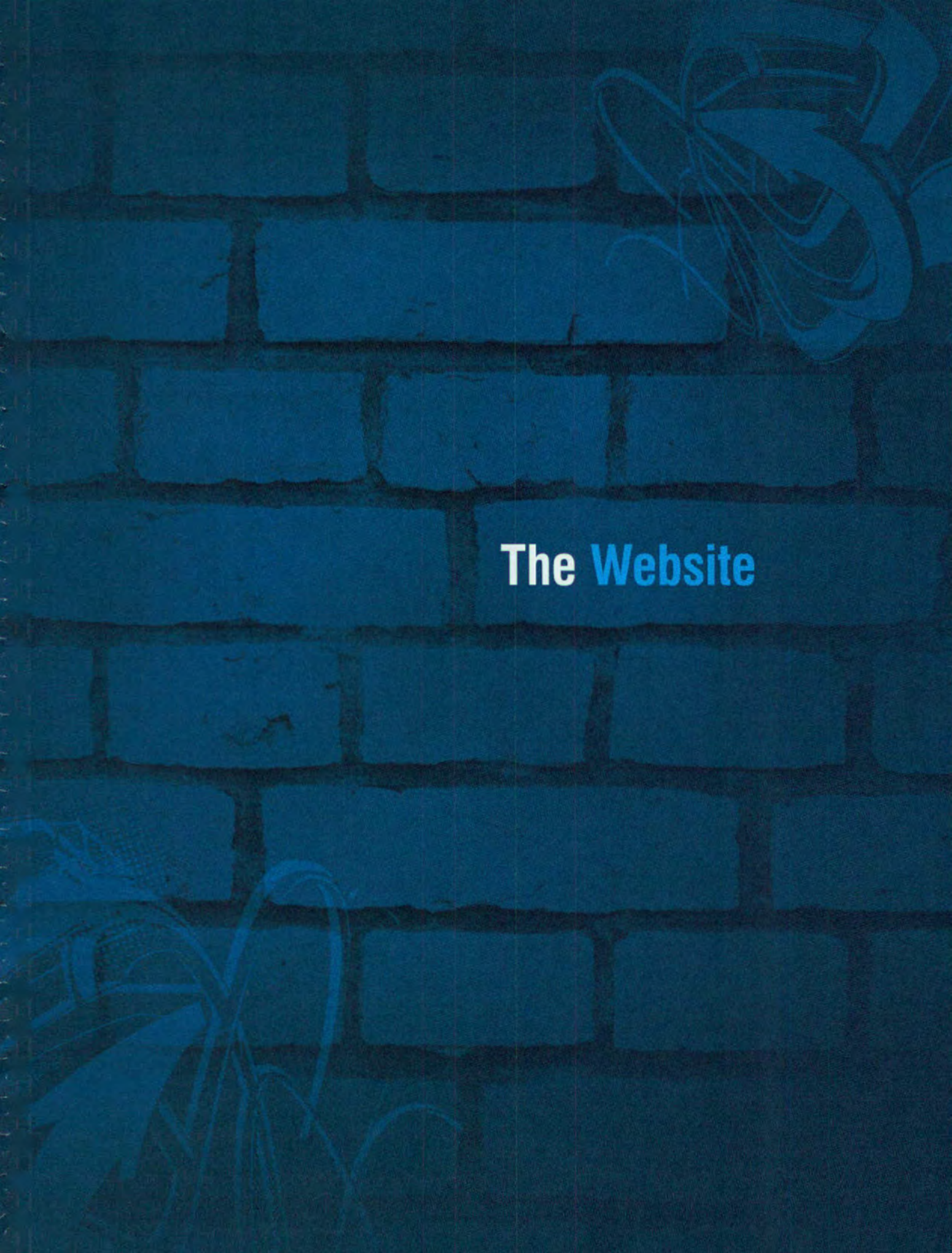
Magazine, a newspaper written for students by students, as well as by the Ministry's traditional media tools, such as news releases, information bulletins, media notices and Ministerial events.

Speak Out had the incredible privilege of engaging a wide variety of students from across Alberta this launch year. And the work continues. *Speak Out* forums are scheduled for the upcoming 2009–2010 school year. A *Speak Out* forum DVD toolkit, enabling students to speak out any time and anywhere, will be publicly available in October 2009. Planning for the second Annual Student Conference in May 2010 is well underway, and the Minister's Student Advisory Council is being actively engaged.

A growing body of evidence links student engagement with graduation rates and academic success. Asking for students' input, taking them seriously and taking action on their ideas will move us toward creating more engaged students and citizens and a more effective education system in Alberta. Alberta Education has committed to hearing the voices of young people and valuing the information they provide by taking action on their ideas.

"Mr. Speaker, it's also my pleasure to introduce to you and through you today a number of Alberta Education employees whose innovative work on Speak Out, the Alberta Student Engagement Initiative, has gained momentum across Alberta and high praise with education stakeholders, parents, the media, and, most importantly, the students themselves…These fine individuals are responsible for motivating Alberta's youth to participate in an ongoing province-wide forum on education, and they deserve the appreciation of the Assembly and all Albertans for raising the level of discussion in an engagement of our students. I'd ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly."

(Honourable Dave Hancock, Monday, March 9, 2009, Alberta Legislature)


The Website

The Website

Speak Out was the first government-led student engagement initiative in Canada to provide an interactive website. The *Speak Out* website provides an online presence that allows students to discuss education issues, concerns and solutions with their peers, Alberta Education and the public at large. Alberta has more than 200,000 students in grades 9 to 12 across more than 660,000 square kilometres. The *Speak Out* interactive website (**www.speakout.alberta.ca**) was launched to reach all Alberta students and give them a chance to speak out.

☞ **visit speakout.alberta.ca**

What Happened

The website was launched in phases, and the development team sought student input at *Speak Out* forums before the official launch to ensure that the look, feel and content resonated with its target audience. The beta version of the *Speak Out* website went live without any interactivity on October 15, 2008. The website was then soft-launched with interactive discussion boards and a daily blog on November 3, 2008. The website's official launch coincided with the official launch of *Speak Out* – the Alberta Student Engagement Initiative, on November 26, 2008. The website features a daily blog, student-generated discussion boards, information on the Annual Student Conference and the Minister's Student Advisory Council, summaries of each *Speak Out* forum, weekly poll questions and information on contests and sponsors. The "Discuss" tab houses the discussion board, where youth can talk to each other and to us. The "Blog" tab is where we can talk to our website users and keep them informed about what is going on with *Speak Out* in particular and in the world of education more generally.

The website is fully moderated, which means that each comment is reviewed and approved by the *Speak Out* team prior to being posted on the website. This process ensures relevance, privacy, anonymity and safety. Maintaining a safe environment was critical in order for students to interact and to voice their thoughts and opinions. The *Speak Out* team also developed community rules for all users. With these clear expectations, the website has a 90% approval rating.

Our community rules are:

- Keep it relevant
- Keep it respectful
- Keep it safe (no names, no places, no schools, no contact info, no URLs)
- Keep an open mind
- Keep it clean

As of July 30, 2009, the *Speak Out* website boasted more than 1,000 registered users, who generated more than 4,500 posts in 280 topic areas. The discussion boards also registered more than 95,000 viewings, which illustrates the growing traffic on the site. Discussion boards, by their very nature, tend to cultivate more "lurking" than posting. Lurkers actively visit the site to read posts and blogs, but rarely register or contribute to the discussions themselves. This kind of visitor is still engaged in the same way that an active listener is engaged in a regular conversation. Since our site is fully public, and anyone can access and search the discussion boards and blogs, we can only "track" these lurkers through the number of discussion board viewings. To participate in the weekly poll, enter a survey contest, post comments to the daily blogs or become active contributors to the discussion boards, users must register.

> "I like the idea of moderation. Too many discussion boards become a place of random two year old insults and profanity, where nothing intelligent is ever said. Moderation keeps this forum a place of intelectual disscussion!"[1]

What We Heard

The *Speak Out* website features a "Discuss" tab where students can create their own discussion topics, view the archive of discussion posts and respond to ongoing conversations. The discussion section is divided into several "forums" created by the *Speak Out* team, including monthly featured discussion forums. When students join, they can create an anonymous personal profile, complete with an avatar and a signature signoff. Members can then create their own topics for discussing their school experiences and their education with other students across Alberta. Discussion topics have ranged from what kind of music is best for studying, to suggestions for improving the curriculum. Students have enjoyed being able to connect and speak out with peers, as is clear from the tremendous response. Students are driving the discussion, and because they are in control of the content, the site stays relevant and active.

General Discussion Forums

The forums that have been featured on the website include:

- Been there, done that...
- Bullying...
- C'est ton éducation. Qu'en penses-tu?
- School work
- Stressed out!
- Teaching that works for me.
- What happened in school today?

The **"Been there, done that"** discussion forum was a place where students could give and seek advice. Recent graduates focused on the importance of creating a life plan with defined goals. They emphasized that students need to have goals to work toward but recognize the need for flexibility because interests may change over time.

The students also said that while they appreciate the advice and guidance they receive from family, they often feel a lot of pressure to live their lives according to their families' expectations. The students said they are happiest when they have the freedom to follow their own dreams and have the support of their friends and family regardless of their perceived success or failure.

[1] This report shows all quotations from students' contributions to *Speak Out* as originally written, with no changes to spelling or grammar.

The **"Bullying"** discussion forum was provided for students to share experiences, advice and tips to get through a bullying experience. Students shared stories of being victims of bullying. They said bullying exists in many forms, such as cyber bullying, and is an unavoidable aspect of school life. They said that sharing their bullying stories helped them manage and move beyond the emotional pain.

Students shared advice on how to deal with bullying. Many said that intervening in a bullying situation can be tough, especially when they don't know the people involved. They said it is best to notify authority figures about an incident and only to speak out at the time of the incident if they feel safe enough to do so.

Students also discussed how to prevent bullying. They recognized that sometimes the person doing the bullying needs friends or someone to talk to. They thought students should be informed about what constitutes bullying and how to make themselves less vulnerable. Education could help make people more tolerant and compassionate by teaching about differences.

The **"C'est ton éducation. Qu'en penses-tu?"** discussion forum allowed French-speaking students to engage in discussions on education in French. The discussions in this forum were conducted in French but have been translated to English for the purposes of this report.

Students who participated in this discussion spoke about their pride in French language and culture. They are proud of their heritage and glad their parents have continued their traditions through the language. Achieving bilingual status in French and English is an accomplishment these students will always be proud of.

Students also spoke about the advantages of learning French. They believe knowing French will increase their education choices and job opportunities. Fluency in French will allow them to communicate with people in other cultures across Canada and in other countries.

These students also discussed threats to the French language program. They believe French-Canadian culture and identity may die out if nothing is done to promote their existence in schools. They mentioned a need for more awareness about the differences between French language courses designed for francophone and anglophone students.

The **"School Work"** discussion forum was provided for students to discuss the work they do in class, as well as homework, assignments, projects and tests. The students shared concerns about graduation and post-secondary education—for example, how preparation for graduation ceremonies commands a lot of their time and energy, bringing stress but also excitement. Decisions about post-secondary school and scholarships, including how to apply, where to apply and how to meet the requirements, can also be overwhelming. Students said they need more help.

Students also discussed tests and diploma exams. They said parents and teachers place so much emphasis on diploma exams that students become more anxious and stressed about them. The students said that practice exams, regular study habits, a positive attitude and sharing study tips and test-taking techniques help them prepare for exams. They also said proper time management is a crucial skill for dealing with heavy workloads.

The students made suggestions for increasing the excitement factor in their school work. They said school readings for subjects like social studies and English would be more interesting if the texts assigned to them were more modern, relevant and interesting. They also said they are excited by newer, non-traditional subjects like media studies, psychology and culinary studies.

Student voice

"I enjoy planning and having goals, but I definitely don't have all the answers to people's questions about my future yet."

"I challenge you to send someone a positive honesty box message just for the fun of it and to help counter the cyber-bullying that happens on facebook. :)"

"If you review each night, studying for an upcoming exam gets much easier because you know the material and you aren't cramming everything the night before."

Students said they enjoy classes more when the teacher explains the relevance and ultimate purpose of the material, gives clear objectives and instructions, uses a variety of teaching techniques and is enthusiastic, approachable and knowledgeable about the subject. They also enjoy classes in which the course content includes more current affairs, their classmates want to be there, class sizes are small enough to support comfortable discussions, their assignments involve more than robotic memorization and the students are physically comfortable.

Topics the students enjoyed debating, but remain divided about, include singing the national anthem, secular versus religious education, the full-year or semester school setup, public versus private schools, the use of music in class, cell phone rules, dress code regulations, gender-segregated schools and the recital of pledges to school, country and God each morning.

Finally, students made suggestions for improving the quality of life at school. They believe school cafeterias need to offer more options and healthier menu selections. They also said schools should recognize accomplishments other than academic or sports success, such as attendance, community involvement and volunteer activities. Students spoke about learning more from interacting with people who are different from them than by simply reading about these different groups, so they would like their school to encourage social interaction among students of all backgrounds. They would also like their school to maintain a consistent and simple school schedule, so they can focus on learning and not on which day of the week it is.

The **"Stressed Out!"** discussion forum gave students the place to discuss what stresses them out. Students talked about the sources of their stress: school, homework, friends, family, dealing with others' expectations, extracurricular activities, teachers, university and scholarship applications, making decisions about the future, social and teen drama, diploma exams, work, dealing with lack of motivation, changing schools, lack of sleep and poor learning environments.

The students also talked about how they de-stress. They identified stress-management strategies including physical activities; listening to music; hanging out, talking and venting with friends; dancing; watching television; snacking; reading; napping and using available resources, such as guidance counsellors and learning centres, for help.

They also talked about ways they could eliminate or minimize sources of stress: managing time well by being aware of time spent on certain activities and making productive use of spare time; making study schedules and sticking to them; making school a priority so other activities don't infringe on school work; choosing their friends wisely and reminding themselves to ignore gossip; seeking guidance and advice from informed sources, as well as doing their own research; keeping lines of communication open with their teachers; making new friends and focusing on friendships.

The **"Teaching that works for me!"** discussion forum allowed students to discuss teaching styles that do and do not work for them. When it came to teaching methods that work, the students said they enjoy discussing and debating concepts in class and appreciate their teacher keeping discussions on topic. They said they like teachers to vary teaching methods to accommodate all learning styles. They also said that hands-on activities help them understand new concepts in math and science classes.

The students used this forum to provide advice to educators. Students think teachers should find that perfect balance between being strict and fun, formal and informal, demanding and flexible. They would also like teachers to teach their subjects with creativity and enthusiasm, be approachable, treat their students like adults, do their research and explain why things being taught are relevant.

Student voice

"Why do writing assignments have to be about some boring topic?...I wish that teachers would put some excitement into teaching... I would do soo much better..."

"What helps is just turning off the music, shutting down MSN, facebook etc and just working on one thing till I get it done. The success of getting one thing done often helps the stress levels and give me motivation to get more stuff doe."

"Teachers who take the time to make their room inviting do make it easier to learn..."

Another theme in this discussion forum was learning environments that make students comfortable. To perform at their best, the students said, they need to be physically comfortable. They said testing environments are too artificial and unnecessarily stressful. Keeping things calm and relaxed helps students avoid test anxiety.

> "I personally need a blend of textbook work, essays, assignments, questions, labs and other hands on stuff in order to learn."

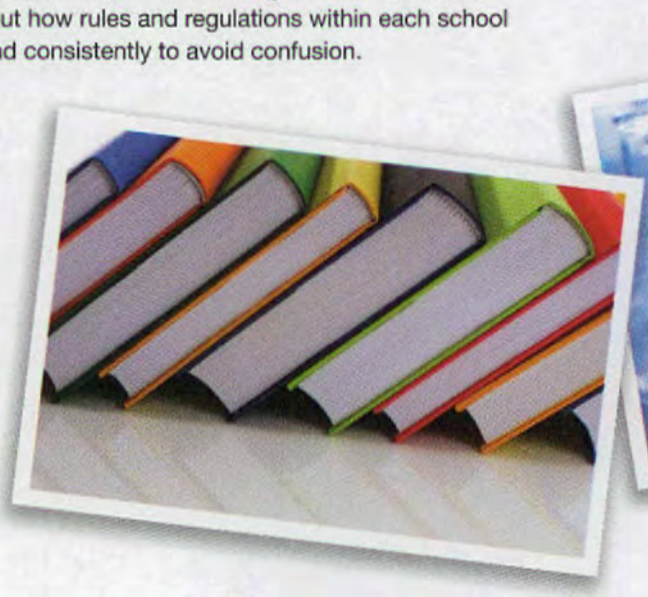
Finally, students said they would like teachers to keep course content relevant and interesting by including more current affairs. They would also like to see the CALM class revised so the material is more relevant to immediate life experiences.

The **"What happened in school today?"** forum was provided for students to discuss how their day went, whether positive or negative. An important theme in this forum was that social relations are as challenging to students as academic endeavours. Learning how to deal with friends and social drama, such as gossip, bullying and peer pressure, can be exhausting, and the students said it can often distract them from their school work. A strong and supportive social network is necessary for their success and sanity, despite the potential for distraction.

Students used this forum to make suggestions for improving the curriculum. They said educational field trips are an excellent yet underused activity that helps them understand and apply concepts taught in class. They said physical education in high school should be about developing a positive attitude and becoming familiar with an active lifestyle, not only about skills. The students would like their courses revised to include more global and current affairs, so they are more relevant and interesting. They also said substitute teachers should be used more strategically and be better prepared for the class they're teaching.

> "field trips can be great! it completely breaks the repetitve enviroment of a classroom. and it helps everyone who learns by doing."

Students also used this forum to discuss school politics and administrative challenges. They said students should be encouraged to approach the school administration with issues and not be afraid to offer solutions of their own. The student voice needs to be heard for administrative decisions, and the reasons for decisions should be fully disclosed to students because they are the ones most affected. Students also talked about how rules and regulations within each school should be enforced respectfully and consistently to avoid confusion.



Featured Discussion Forums

The *Speak Out* website featured a monthly discussion forum hosted by Alberta Education staff involved in various programs and initiatives. The following groups hosted discussions:

- December 2008 hosted by Special Education
- January 2009 hosted by Stakeholder Technology
- February 2009 hosted by International Education
- March 2009 hosted by Workforce Planning
- April 2009 hosted by Distributed Learning
- May 2009 hosted by Provincial Approach to Student Information
- June 2009 hosted by Inspiring Education

In **December 2008, the featured discussion forum** was hosted by **Special Education**. Students were asked to share what they thought about special education in their schools. They said school should cater to all types of needs. School should provide the tools and training for student success in all aspects of their lives, not just academic instruction. The students said their schools could make better use of program funds by using existing resources more effectively and by finding creative solutions to student needs. They also said academic success should not be a determining factor when deciding which students need additional funding for their education.

The students also voiced concerns about how people talk about and treat students with special needs. They would like people to reconsider using the word "special" to label students who require unconventional help in school because of the negative connotations. They also said that separating students with different learning needs can be helpful, but should be done as little as possible so people become used to interacting with and learning from one another.

> "There is lots that people with disabilities can do, it is only the matter of asking finding out what they need."

The **January 2009 featured discussion forum, "Using technology to learn,"** was hosted by **Stakeholder Technology**. This forum allowed students to talk about their experiences with technology in their classes and how they would like to use things such as laptops, cell phones, cameras and the Internet in their learning.

The students who participated in this discussion said technology can enhance their learning if it is incorporated responsibly. They want to see technology incorporated into the classroom to enhance their learning, not distract them or make them overly reliant on it in the long run. They believe online learning or other tools can never outweigh the benefits of classroom interactions.

The students said computer labs, laptops and online school networks, such as SchoolZone, help them to complete assignments, do research, organize their notes and schedules and communicate with teachers. Tools like PowerPoint can enhance a lecture when used to accompany discussion, but teachers must not to let it replace their teaching. The students believe that tools like SMART Boards are a good investment when used effectively.

The students also said the use of other technology, such as cell phones, can be distracting. For the students, cell phones are an essential communication tool outside the classroom but are mostly distractions when used during class. Laptops are great for taking lecture notes in class, but it's hard for teachers to monitor inappropriate Internet use.

The **February 2009 featured discussion forum, "Where is the world in your education?,"** was hosted by **International Education**. This forum allowed students to share how global issues are included in their studies and create opportunities to explore the world.

Students who participated in this forum spoke about their desire to be global citizens, and what that means to them. They enjoy learning about and debating current global issues and being involved with humanitarian activities. They said extracurricular activities that focus on raising awareness and social activism are rewarding. They wish they knew more about how to become involved in those kinds of activities.

The students said the school curriculum should include more global issues. They said they currently learn about the world and other cultures in courses such as social studies, English and other language courses. They feel the curriculum should focus on finding solutions to the world's problems and on learning about people and leaders who have done good, rather than focusing so much on the negative aspects of the world's history. The students also said schools should place more emphasis on student exchange programs and school trips because travelling and interacting with people is the best way to learn about other cultures.

In our **March 2009 featured discussion forum** hosted by **Workforce Planning**, students were asked to discuss whether or not they were interested in pursuing teaching as a career. For some students, teaching appeals to them as a career because teachers can have a positive influence in people's lives by helping them learn, grow and have confidence. Teaching is unappealing to others because they feel that it requires a lot of patience, involves long hours, is stressful and might be too restrictive when it comes to teaching styles and content.

Overall, students said their interest in teaching depends on their teachers' portrayals of their jobs: students whose teachers portray their jobs positively are more likely to consider becoming a teacher. Students also commented on how current teaching practices could be improved. They believe English and social studies classes could be improved by more discussions and small written responses, that math and science classes could be improved by more hands-on and interactive activities and that teachers generally need more freedom so they can teach the subjects for which they have the most passion.

The **April 2009 featured discussion forum, "Learning any time, anyplace, any pace,"** was hosted by **Distributed Learning.** Students were encouraged to explore the possibilities and implications of learning in flexible learning environments.

The students who participated in this discussion spoke about their need for both structure and flexibility. They benefit from a structured learning environment and from the guidance offered by regular interactions with teachers and peers. However, they also need flexibility to learn at their own speed and in the places most comfortable for them.

The students discussed how their schools uphold this concept of flexible learning. Some students said their school offers online courses that allow them to learn at their own pace and in environments more comfortable for them. International Baccalaureate students said their classes are often divided according to students'

Student voice

"Teachers are so essential in shaping the future generations. They can be a catalyst for change. Inspire young people to do great things."

"The best "advertising campaign" for careers in teaching and education is the living advertising that educators are."

preferred learning pace and interest level. The students believe that teachers can help by being flexible in their scheduling and by offering after-school tutorials or question periods.

The **May 2009 featured discussion forum, "Student information and modern education,"** hosted by **Provincial Approach to Student Information,** gave students an opportunity to discuss how information is used in the modern learning environment.

When the students were asked about their experience transferring schools, they said the main challenge was that the new school or district did not have any of their information on file. Transferring personal information would be helpful to the new school, though the students did express concerns that they might be unfairly judged based on their files before having a chance to prove themselves.

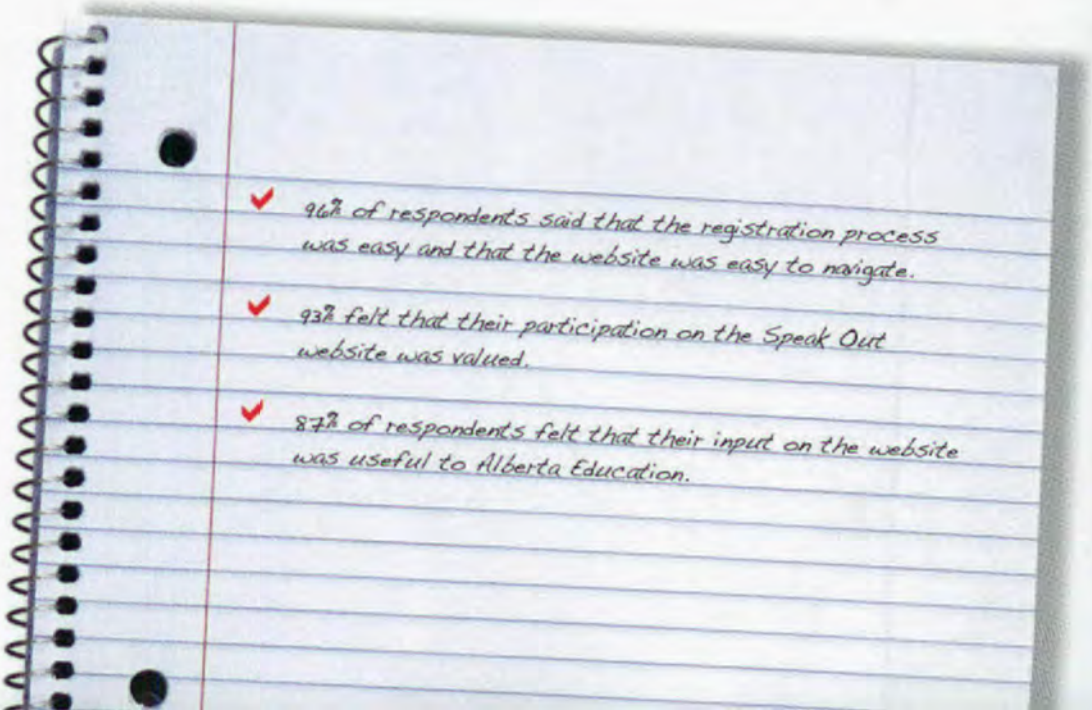
The **June 2009 featured discussion forum** was hosted by **Inspiring Education**. Students were asked to share what they thought education should look like in 20 years. The students said they felt 12 years was enough time for them to spend in school. After 12 years of studying, they are ready to move on. They would appreciate the flexibility to complete their classes more quickly or slowly, depending on their life circumstances and personal pace.

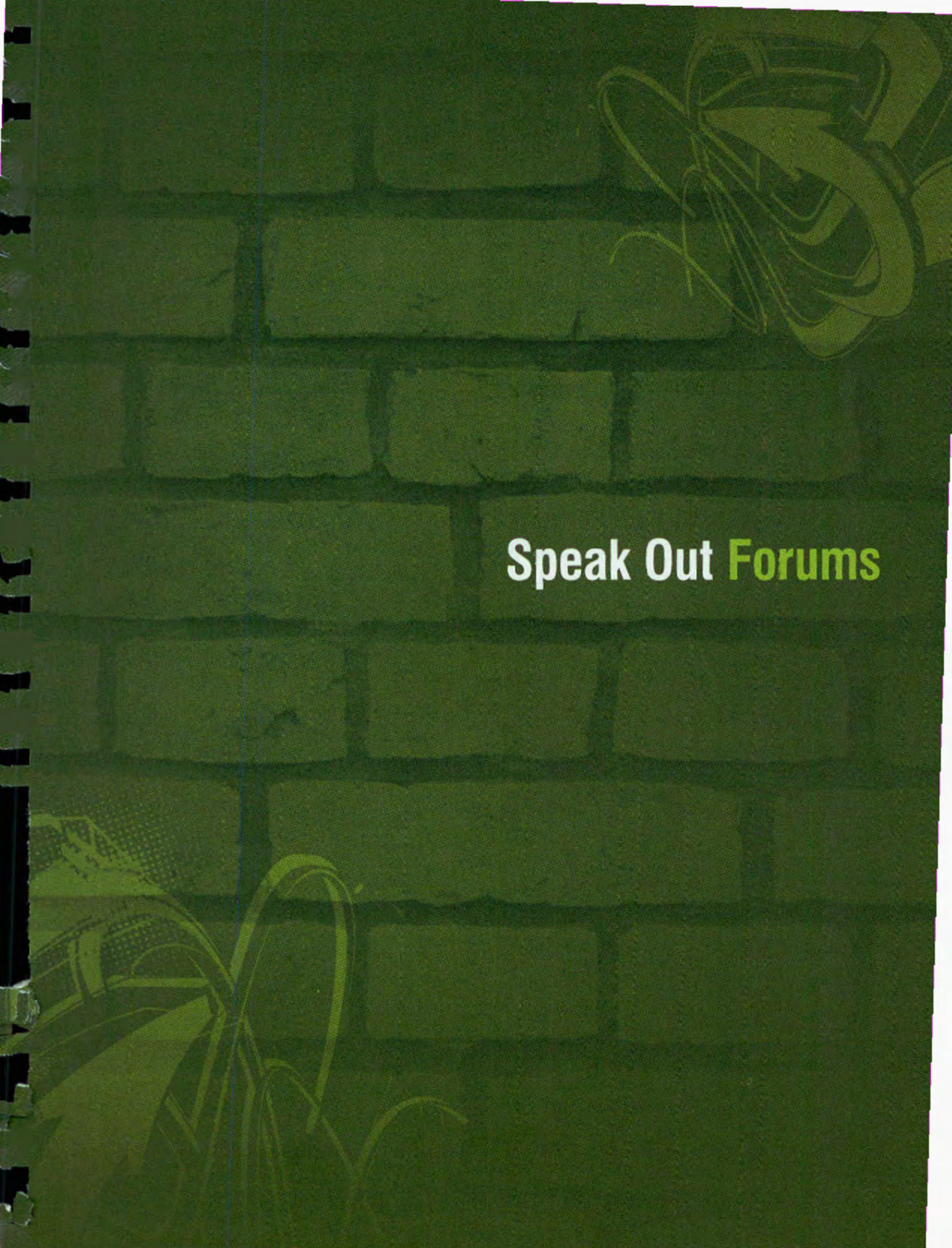
The students said the current grading system is arbitrary and does not reflect their true effort or progress. They agreed that there needs to be assessment showing that they are progressing in their class, but said this system needs to be improved. Under the current system, a student's grade, be it good or bad, might reflect the student's reaction to the content or teaching style more than the student's efforts or understanding.

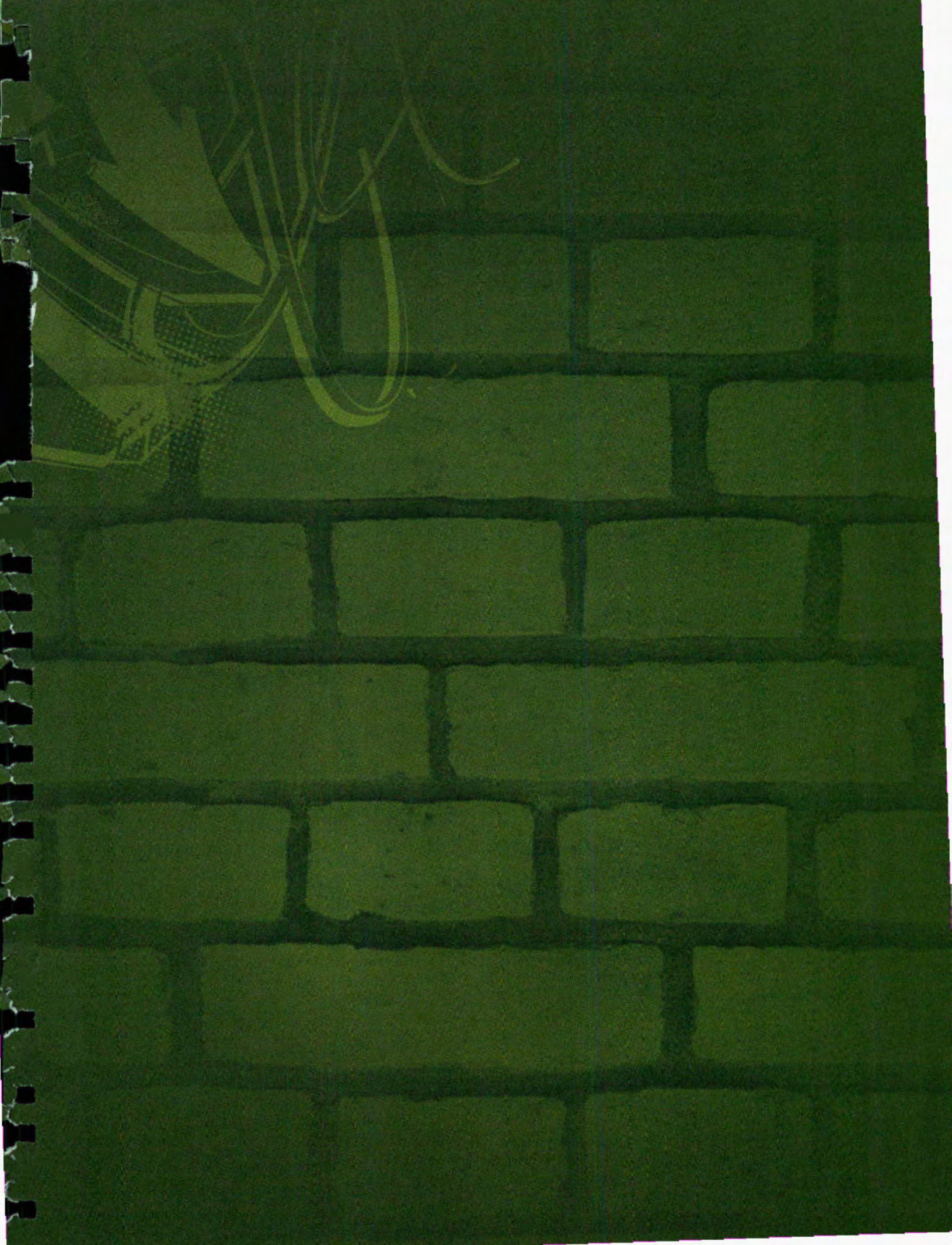
When asked what school is and what it should be, the students had a variety of opinions. For some, school is a place where they learn the skills they will need in the future. For others, school does not allow the freedom to explore their interests and desires. Some reflected that students should feel privileged to have the opportunity to attend school at all.

How We Did

At the conclusion of the school year, we surveyed users asking for feedback on the *Speak Out* website. Selected responses are listed below:


96% of respondents said that the registration process was easy and that the website was easy to navigate.
93% felt that their participation on the Speak Out website was valued.
87% of respondents felt that their input on the website was useful to Alberta Education.


Speak Out Forums



Speak Out Forums

Speak Out forums provided the opportunity for the team to speak directly to students about their education. The *Speak Out* team conducted 38 forums in schools across the province during October and November 2008 and February and March 2009. The team travelled more than 12,500 kilometres and spoke, in person, to almost 1,600 students in 29 of the 62 school districts. The forums were conducted in all varieties of schools, including public, private, separate, francophone, charter, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI), outreach and young offender schools.

Where We Were

The Fall 2008 and Spring 2009 forum locations and general school district information are listed below. For a detailed list of forum dates, participating schools and school districts, please refer to page 26.

- Calgary (private, public, separate, francophone, charter)
- Canmore (public)
- Cold Lake (public)
- Donnelly (public)
- Drumheller (separate)
- Edmonton (private, public, separate, francophone)
- Fort Macleod (public)
- Fort McMurray (public, separate)
- Grande Prairie (separate)
- Hanna (public)
- High Level (public)
- Hinton (separate)
- Lethbridge (public)
- Mayerthorpe (public)
- Medicine Hat (separate/public)
- Peace River (public)
- Red Deer (separate)
- Rocky Mountain House (public)
- Stettler (public)
- Sylvan Lake (public)
- Wabasca (public)
- Wetaskiwin (public)

Who We Spoke To

At the beginning of each *Speak Out* forum, we asked students a series of "getting to know you" questions. An audience response system was used to collect responses anonymously. Once responses were submitted, results were shown using percentages and graphs. This process also allowed the students to become comfortable with the technology for later in the facilitation process and for the feedback portion of the forum.

The following demographic percentages are based on an average of the responses collected from each of the 1,590 participating students in the 38 *Speak Out* forums. A complete list of questions and results can be found on page 25.

69% of us are physically active.

89% of us are on Facebook, MySpace or Nexopia.

59% of us do one to two hours of homework on an average night.

In our spare time, we hang out with friends, play sports and listen to music.

91% of us have an MP3 Player.

77% of us have cell phones.

46% of us send more than 50 texts/day.

49% of us have a part-time job.

We come to school because we want to go to college or university, because of our friends and because we want to get our high school diploma.

70% of us have +100 friends on our social networks.

63% of us volunteer.

What Happened

In preparation for each *Speak Out* forum, the *Speak Out* team worked with the leadership of each school to ensure that a diverse student population would participate in the session. We were looking for a group that would represent the voices of all our provincial youth, from all different backgrounds—ranging from the academic keeners to those who struggle in school, from those who are into sports to those who love the arts, and everything in between.

At the beginning of each *Speak Out* forum, an overview of *Speak Out* – the Alberta Student Engagement Initiative, was provided. Students were separated into six working groups, which typically included eight students and one table leader. The table leader helped the students keep on task and capture their findings.

Each *Speak Out* forum included activities and games for team development within each working group. These team-building activities were interspersed with the facilitation questions. At the end of each forum, students were given the opportunity to provide feedback both electronically with the use of the audience response system and on a written evaluation form.

The Facilitation

The *Speak Out* forum process included individual and group brainstorming, clustering of similar ideas, theming, voting, and "graphic facilitation." Graphic facilitation is an innovative and powerful facilitation method that captures and visually displays group thought. Small working groups of 8 to 10 students were formed for the facilitation process. The thoughts and recommendations resulting from each question were captured on a banner.

The participants were asked to respond to the following three prompts:

1. *Describe your surroundings and activities when you are learning at your best.*

   The two most important ideas generated by each group were displayed on "suns."

2. *What is holding you back from learning at your best?*

   The two most important obstacles identified by each group were displayed on "rocks."

3. *What can we do to overcome these obstacles and get to your vision of education?*

   The recommendations were displayed on "footprints."

Below is a summary of the facilitation process employed for prompts one and two:

1. Individual brainstorming: Each student came up with several ideas and wrote down one idea per sticky note.
2. Group brainstorming: In working groups, each participant shared his or her two or three most important ideas, and the group discussed them.
3. Clustering ideas: The working group clustered similar thoughts.
4. Naming the clusters: The group named each cluster by its main idea or theme.
5. Identifying two themes: Each group chose two themes to be posted on the banner, on a sun (prompt one) and a rock (prompt two).
6. Forum group voting: Using the audience response system, each participant voted on all the themes identified on the banner, choosing two ideas as the most important. All voting was captured electronically.

The facilitation process was altered for prompt three in the following manner:

- The table leaders encouraged a brief group brainstorming session, followed by an individual brainstorm recorded directly on the "footprints." Students came up with as many recommendations as possible to overcome the obstacles identified in prompt two. Once students wrote their ideas on "footprints," they shared their ideas with their group, then placed them on the banner.

What We Heard

At the *Speak Out* forums, students said that when they are learning at their best, their individual learning styles are being addressed through effective teaching styles in a positive learning environment. When asked what is holding them back, students pointed to disengaged and ineffective teaching styles in a distracting environment where they are presented material that isn't interesting or relevant to them. Finally, when asked what can be done to address these obstacles, students said they need to better connect with their teachers through ongoing support, evaluation and training. Students want to see improvements in their learning environment. They want a greater focus on student health and tools for self-improvement. They echoed voices we heard online, which suggested improving course material and better integrating technology into the school system.

Prompt one: Describe your surroundings and activities when you are learning at your best ("suns").

The purpose of this prompt was to identify the conditions and tools required for optimal learning. Students were encouraged to consider how they learn best, both in school and in their personal lives. The following table summarizes the issues that consistently arose from each *Speak Out* forum. The themes are taken directly from student input and are listed in order of importance as ranked by students.

Theme	Student Ideas
Individual Learning Styles to be Addressed	• Hands-on/interactive • Group work and class discussions • Independent study • Debates • Visual aids
Positive Learning Environment	• Minimal distractions • Quiet or use of music • Calm, relaxed atmosphere – minimal stress • Physical comfort: food, sleep, etc. • Positive attitudes of teachers and students • Small class sizes
Effective Teaching Styles	• Passionate teachers • Qualified and well-prepared teachers • Personable, laid-back but professional teachers • Use of good examples and engaging projects • Clear communication • Variety and creativity • Enough time is given to grasp concepts and complete assignments
Help/Support is Available	• Teachers, peers, and family are available to answer questions and for discussion • Tutoring
Interesting Subjects	• Relevant and related to life • Variety
Time Management	• Good school/life balance • Organization • Meeting deadlines • Flexible class scheduling
Strong Student/Teacher Relations	• Clear, respectful communication • Fairness, acceptance, and support
Self-Motivation	• Focused and motivated to work • Good work ethic

Prompt two: What is holding you back from learning at your best ("rocks")?

The purpose of this prompt was to have students reflect on the boundaries or limitations that prevent them from reaching their individual "optimal learning." The following table summarizes the issues that consistently arose from each *Speak Out* forum. The themes are taken directly from input provided by the students and are listed in order of importance as ranked by students.

Theme	Student Ideas
Disengaged/Ineffective Teaching Styles	• Lack of preparation to effectively use class time • Teaching pace during class is very fast • Lack of variety in teaching methods and use of different tools • Some teachers appear unmotivated while teaching class material • Some teachers exhibit disrespectful behaviour/ attitudes toward students • Lack of time for additional/extra help from teachers (some teachers appear to be unavailable) • Some teachers lack skills/qualifications to teach certain subjects
Distractions from Surrounding Environment	• Study areas are too noisy • Unable to focus because of friends, home life, social activities, etc. • Peers are disruptive during class time • Lack of quality resources—cost constraints • Lack of personal balance (i.e., tired, hungry, "bad day", stress, etc.)
Lack of Interest in Material Presented	• Uninterested in certain mandatory requirements • No flexibility in choosing a focus in areas of interest • Lack of variety in elective options that are currently available • Irrelevant/outdated curriculum
Time Management	• Students are working too many hours (part-time jobs) • Unable to effectively balance daily schedule (homework, social life, part-time job, extracurricular activities, etc.) • Overwhelming workload from each class • The school day is too long/starts too early
Social/Peer Pressures and Expectations	• Concern over maintaining friendships – the need to appear "cool" • Temptation of drugs and alcohol • Concern over judgment from peers
Overwhelming Stress and Pressure from School Life	• Unrealistic expectations for school work • Heavy workloads create additional pressure (lack of balance between school and personal life)
Exams and Assignments are Too Heavily Weighted	• Final exams carry too much weight • Unrealistic emphasis on formal testing (final and mid-term exams) vs. assignments

Prompt three: What can we do to overcome these obstacles and get to your vision of education ("footprints")?

The purpose of this prompt was to allow students to be creative and provide solutions or strategies for overcoming the obstacles, boundaries or limitations identified in the discussion on the second prompt ("rocks"). Students were asked to provide as many "footprint" solutions as possible. The following table summarizes the solutions that consistently arose from each *Speak Out* forum. The themes are taken directly from more than 4,600 pieces of student input.

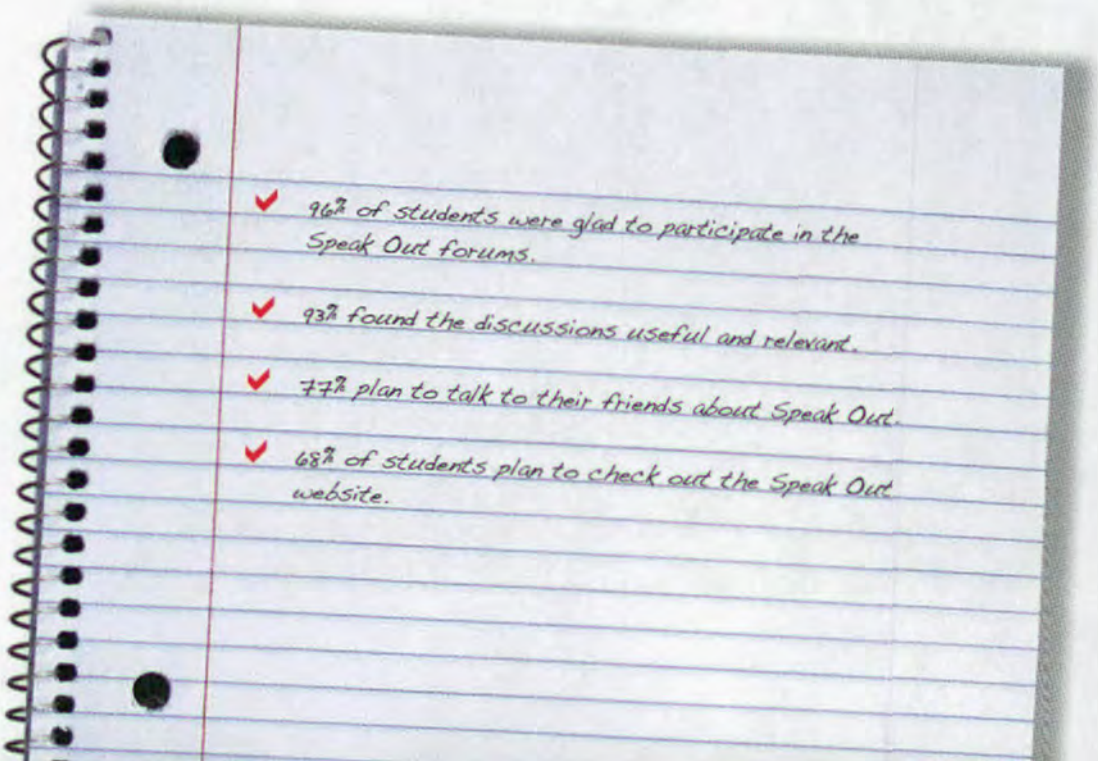
Theme	Student Ideas
Support, Evaluation, Training and Improvement for Educators	• Increase compensation • Provide more opportunity for professional development • Provide options for structured, focused training throughout career • Ensure teachers are knowledgeable about the subjects they are teaching • Demonstrate motivation and enthusiasm for their subject matter • Demonstrate respect for students • Provide more options for additional help/different ways of learning • Improve communication between teachers • Have student-teacher conferences/student evaluations of teachers • Modify screening process for new hires • Implement a formal and ongoing evaluation process for educators
Improved Learning Environment	• Smaller class sizes • Modify school schedules (i.e., starting the day later, longer lunch/breaks, shorter class times, four-day weeks) • Improve transportation options (i.e., increase availability, reduce cost to students, provide alternatives to allow for extracurricular activities) • Allow students to eat in class • More independent study • More access to academic assistance outside of class time • Improve student-teacher interactions/interactive classes • Renovate/update old school buildings • Improve classroom environment with a focus on learning and comfort • Allow students to use iPods/MP3 players in school • More opportunities for students to excel • Have flexible and clear expectations for students • Increase expectation for educators to discipline disruptive students • Provide more options/funding for extracurricular activities (i.e., clubs and sports teams)
Focus on Student Health	• Develop/increase awareness of support systems (i.e., school counsellors/professionals, peer support programs) - to help students manage pressure from family, peers, school and self - to help build school/life balance - to address teenage drama - to address bullying - to support students with addictions • Provide healthier food options • Students need more sleep

Theme	Student Ideas
Independent Student Self-improvement	• Setting goals • Self-motivation/self-discipline • Assist in the development of time management skills • Being positive
Improve Course Material	• Update curriculum to include relevant material • Re-evaluate exam weighting (i.e., diploma exams) • Introduce more project work as an alternative for testing • Provide more course options—consider sharing resources between multiple schools • Students requested less homework or more time in school to complete school work • Allow for flexibility in schedules • Better funding for school activities (i.e., fieldtrips, courses, programs) • More specialized programs (i.e., financial management courses, courses for students with special needs, accelerated learning programs)
Integration of Technology in Schools	• Provide all teachers and students with laptops and Internet access as a necessary requirement for learning • Increase the integration of technology as it is environmentally friendly, efficient, relevant, and more convenient • Re-evaluate censorship policies on public Internet sites • Increase visual and media-based learning experience • Online study groups/help with teachers and students

The *Speak Out* team understands the importance of being open and transparent in this process. Within days of delivering each *Speak Out* forum, the student-generated data was transcribed into a "What We Heard" document and posted on the *Speak Out* website. The document was also emailed to all forum participants and the school host.

How We Did

At the conclusion of each *Speak Out* forum, we asked students a series of evaluation questions, using the audience response system to collect responses anonymously. The responses are listed below:


✔ 96% of students were glad to participate in the Speak Out forums.
✔ 93% found the discussions useful and relevant.
✔ 77% plan to talk to their friends about Speak Out.
✔ 68% of students plan to check out the Speak Out website.

Speak Out Forum Demographic Information

During the 2008–2009 *Speak Out* campaign, the *Speak Out* team, including 71 volunteer facilitators from Alberta Education, travelled more than 12,500 kilometres across the province of Alberta and delivered 38 *Speak Out* forums to a total of 1,590 high school students. The following summarizes provincial averages of the demographic information collected.

1) I am a...

Boy	**– 47%**
Girl	**– 53%**

2) I am in Grade...

9	**– 22%**
10	**– 25%**
11	**– 28%**
12	**– 25%**

3) I have a cell phone, Blackberry or iPhone.

Yes	**– 77%**
No	**– 23%**

4) How many text messages do you send every day?

None	**– 24%**
1–49	**– 30%**
50–99	**– 17%**
100–149	**– 12%**
+150	**– 17%**

5) I have an iPod or MP3 player.

Yes	**– 91%**
No	**– 9%**

6) I have a part-time job.

Yes	**– 49%**
No	**– 51%**

7) I work...

0 hours/week	**– 48%**
1–10 hours/week	**– 21%**
11–20 hours/week	**– 19%**
21–30 hours/week	**– 8%**
+30 hours/week	**– 4%**

8) I am physically active (work out, play on a sports team, etc.).

Yes	**– 69%**
No	**– 31%**

9) I volunteer.

Yes	**– 63%**
No	**– 37%**

10) I usually do about ## hours of homework on an average night.

0 hours/night	**– 32%**
1 hour/night	**– 36%**
2 hours/night	**– 23%**
3 hours/night	**– 6%**
4 or more hours/night	**– 3%**

11) I usually get about ## hours of sleep in an average night.

Less than 5 hours/night	**– 8%**
5 hours/night	**– 8%**
6 hours/night	**– 21%**
7 hours/night	**– 30%**
8 hours/night	**– 21%**
More than 8 hours/night	**– 12%**

12) In my spare time, I usually... (students selected top 2 answers)

Watch TV	**– 12%**
Play sports	**– 28%**
Read	**– 8%**
Play video games	**– 9%**
Hang out with friends	**– 42%**
Hang out online	**– 13%**
Listen to music	**– 19%**
Talk on the phone	**– 6%**
Other	**– 10%**

13) I'm on Facebook, MySpace, Nexopia etc.

Yes	**– 89%**
No	**– 11%**

14) How many "virtual" friends do you have?

None	**– 10%**
1–99	**– 20%**
100–249	**– 32%**
250–499	**– 28%**
+500	**– 10%**

15) I came to school today because... (students selected top 2 answers)

I enjoy it	**– 8%**
My parents made me	**– 10%**
Of my friends	**– 31%**
There's nothing else to do	**– 2%**
I want to get skills for a job	**– 10%**
I want to get my high school diploma	**– 25%**
I want to stay out of trouble	**– 1%**
Of what I learn in classes	**– 4%**
Extracurricular activities (sports, clubs, music, etc.)	**– 12%**
I want to go to college or university	**– 63%**

16) How do you learn best? (students selected top 2 answers)

By listening	**– 17%**
By seeing	**– 35%**
By doing	**– 65%**
By working with others	**– 33%**
By working independently	**– 18%**
By using technology	**– 11%**

SPEAK OUT
ALBERTA STUDENT ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

Speak Out Forum Schedule

October 9, 2008 • Edmonton • J. Percy Page High School
Participating Schools: J. Percy Page High School
School Board(s): Edmonton School District No. 7

October 15, 2008 • Edmonton • Archbishop MacDonald High School
Participating Schools: Archbishop MacDonald High School
School Board(s): Edmonton Catholic Separate School District No. 16

October 22, 2008 (am) • Calgary • Crescent Heights High School
Participating Schools: Crescent Heights High School
School Board(s): Calgary School District No. 19

October 22, 2008 (pm) • Calgary • Foundations for the Future Charter Academy
Participating Schools: Foundations for the Future Charter Academy
School Board(s): Alberta Charter Schools

October 23, 2008 • Calgary • Bishop Grandin High School
Participating Schools: Bishop Grandin High School and Notre Dame High School
School Board(s): Calgary Roman Catholic Separate School District No. 1

October 28, 2008 • Lethbridge • Lethbridge Collegiate Institute
Participating Schools: Lethbridge Collegiate Institute
School Board(s): Lethbridge School District No. 51

October 29, 2008 • Fort Macleod • F.P. Walshe School
Participating Schools: F.P. Walshe School
School Board(s): Livingstone Range School Division No. 68

November 4, 2008 (am) • Fort McMurray • Fort McMurray Public School District
Participating Schools: Westwood Community High School and Fort McMurray Composite High School
School Board(s): Fort McMurray Public School District No. 2833

November 4, 2008 (pm) • Fort McMurray • Father Patrick Mercredi Community High School
Participating Schools: Father Patrick Mercredi Community High School
School Board(s): Fort McMurray Roman Catholic Separate School District No. 32

November 6, 2008 • Wetaskiwin • Wetaskiwin Composite High School
Participating Schools: Wetaskiwin Composite High School
School Board(s): Wetaskiwin Regional Division No. 11

November 13, 2008 • Canmore • Canmore Collegiate High School
Participating Schools: Canmore Collegiate High School
School Board(s): Canadian Rockies Regional Division No. 12

November 18, 2008 • Grande Prairie • St. Joseph Catholic High School
Participating Schools: St. Joseph Catholic High School
School Board(s): Grande Prairie Roman Catholic Separate School District No. 28

November 20, 2008 • Red Deer • École Secondaire Notre Dame High School
Participating Schools: École Secondaire Notre Dame High School
School Board(s): Red Deer Catholic Regional Division No. 39

November 21, 2008 • Stettler • William E. Hay Composite High School
Participating Schools: William E. Hay Composite High School
School Board(s): Clearview School Division No. 71

November 26, 2008 (LAUNCH) • Edmonton • Harry Ainlay High School
Participating Schools: Harry Ainlay High School
School Board(s): Edmonton School District No. 7

February 3, 2009 • Edmonton • Concordia High School
Participating Schools: Concordia High School
School Board(s): Private

February 4, 2009 • Edmonton • École Maurice-Lavallée
Participating Schools: École Maurice-Lavallée and École publique Gabrielle-Roy
School Board(s): Greater North Central Francophone Education Region No. 2

February 5, 2009 • Edmonton • Archbishop O'Leary Catholic High School
Participating Schools: Archbishop O'Leary Catholic High School
School Board(s): Edmonton Catholic Separate School District No. 16

February 10, 2009 • Drumheller • St. Anthony's School
Participating Schools: St. Anthony's School
School Board(s): Christ the Redeemer Catholic Separate Regional Division No. 3

February 11, 2009 • Hanna • J.C. Charyk Hanna School
Participating Schools: J.C. Charyk Hanna School
School Board(s): Prairie Land Regional Division No. 25

February 18, 2009 • Peace River • Peace River High School
Participating Schools: Peace River High School
School Board(s): Peace River School Division No. 10

February 19, 2009 • Donnelly • Georges P. Vanier School
Participating Schools: Georges P. Vanier School
School Board(s): High Prairie School Division No. 48

February 23, 2009 • Calgary • Bowness High School
Participating Schools: Bowness High School
School Board(s): Calgary School District No. 19

February 24, 2009 • Calgary • École de la Rose sauvage
Participating Schools: École de la Rose sauvage, École Sainte-Marguerite-Bourgeoys and École Francophone d'Airdrie
School Board(s): Greater Southern Public Francophone Education Region No. 4

February 25, 2009 • Calgary • Master's Academy and College
Participating Schools: Master's Academy and College
School Board(s): Palliser Regional Division No. 26

February 26, 2009 • Calgary • Calgary French and International School
Participating Schools: Calgary French and International School
School Board(s): Private

March 3, 2009 • High Level • High Level Public School
Participating Schools: High Level Public School
School Board(s): Fort Vermilion School Division No. 52

March 5, 2009 • Wabasca • Mistassiniy School
Participating Schools: Mistassiniy School
School Board(s): Northland School Division No. 61

March 6, 2009 • Edmonton • Kennedale School
Participating Schools: Kennedale School
School Board(s): Edmonton School District No. 7

March 10, 2009 • Hinton • Gerard Redmond Community Catholic School
Participating Schools: Gerard Redmond Community Catholic School
School Board(s): Evergreen Catholic Separate Regional Division No. 2

March 11, 2009 • Mayerthorpe • Mayerthorpe High School
Participating Schools: Mayerthorpe High School
School Board(s): Northern Gateway Regional Division No. 10

March 17, 2009 • Medicine Hat • McCoy High School
Participating Schools: McCoy High School, Medicine Hat High School, and Crescent Heights High School
School Board(s): Medicine Hat Catholic Separate Regional Division No. 20 and Medicine Hat School District No. 76

March 23, 2009 • Edmonton • W.P. Wagner School
Participating Schools: W.P. Wagner School, Ross Sheppard High School, M.E. Lazerte High School, and Strathcona High School
School Board(s): Edmonton School District No. 7

March 24, 2009 • Edmonton • Amiskwaciy Academy
Participating Schools: Amiskwaciy Academy
School Board(s): Edmonton School District No. 7

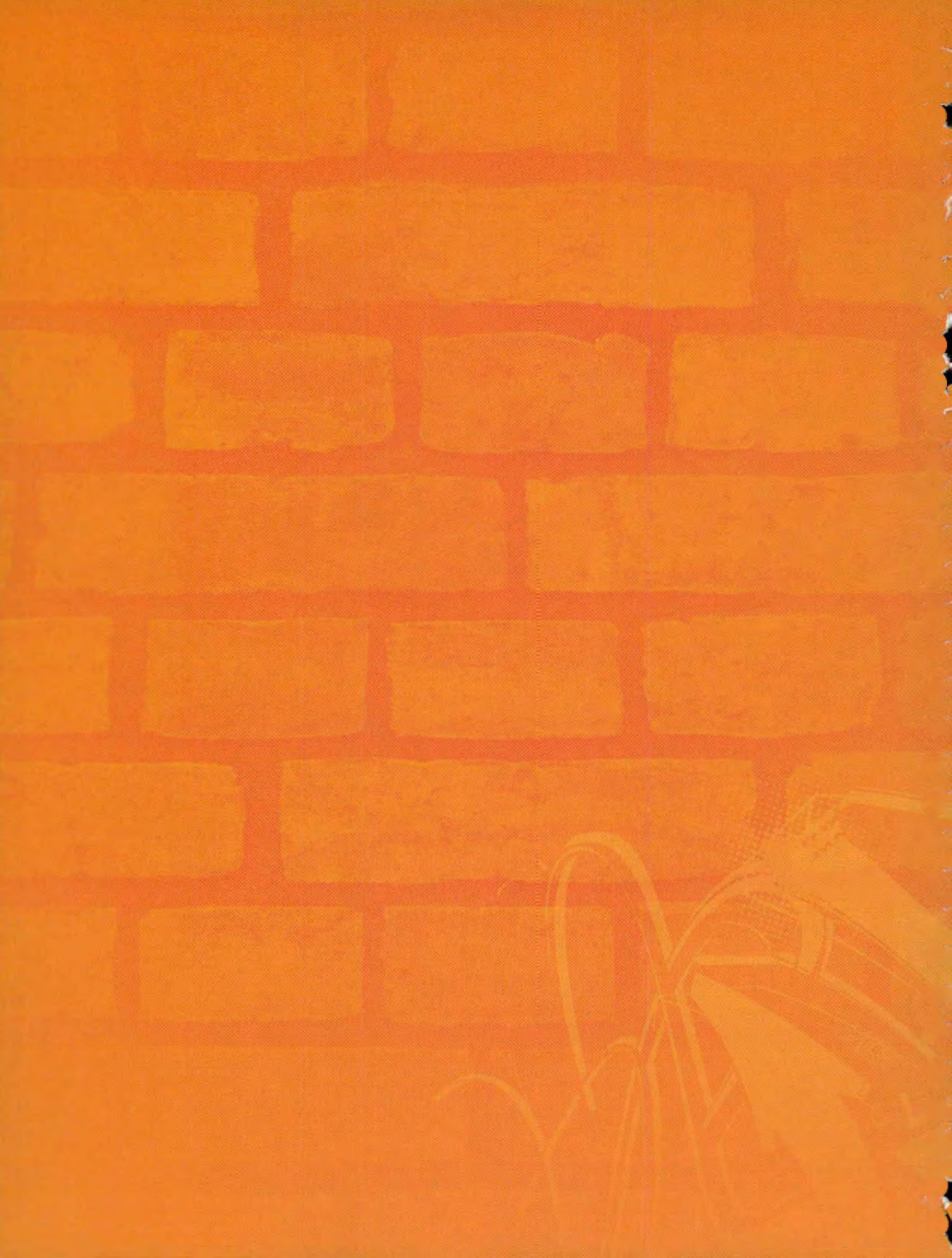
March 25, 2009 • Sylvan Lake • H.J. Cody High School
Participating Schools: H.J. Cody High School
School Board(s): Chinook's Edge School Division No. 73

March 26, 2009 • Rocky Mountain House • West Central High School
Participating Schools: West Central High School, Frank Maddock High School, Caroline School, H.W. Pickup Junior High School, David Thompson High School, Breton High School, and Drayton Christian School
School Board(s): Wild Rose School Division No. 66

March 31, 2009 • Cold Lake • Grand Centre High School
Participating Schools: Grand Centre High School
School Board(s): Northern Lights School Division No. 69

June 9, 2009 • Edmonton • Jasper Place High School
Participating Schools: Jasper Place High School
School Board(s): Edmonton School District No. 7

Annual Student Conference



Annual Student Conference

A total of 191 students and their 137 chaperones, from 64 different communities across Alberta, attended the **Annual Student Conference** in Edmonton on May 3 and 4, 2009, to continue the conversations that began online and at the forums. Students worked together to come up with recommendations about education and their future, for the Minister's consideration. The conference recommendations were based on the 4,600 "footprint" suggestions gathered from the *Speak Out* forums and the 3,800 posts from the online *Speak Out* discussion boards. The next Annual Student Conference is tentatively scheduled for May 14 to 16, 2010, in Edmonton.

The *Speak Out* team coordinated and implemented the conference. They were supported by 14 youth volunteers from the Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) and the Alberta Bullying Prevention Youth Committee (ABPYC) during both days of the conference. Participating as table leaders on the second day of the conference were facilitators from Alberta Education and Alberta Culture and Community Spirit.

Where They Came From

The *Speak Out* team recruited for the Annual Student Conference from all corners of the province. The hometowns of the conference participants are listed below:

- Amisk
- Athabasca
- Beaumont
- Bellevue
- Black Diamond
- Blairmore
- Bruderheim
- Calgary
- Canmore
- Caslan
- Chestermere
- Cochrane
- Czar
- De Winton
- Dixonville
- Drayton Valley
- Drumheller
- Eaglesham
- Edmonton
- Enilda
- Falher
- Fort Kent
- Fort Macleod
- Fort Vermilion
- Gift Lake
- Grande Prairie
- Grimshaw
- Grouard
- Hanna
- High Level
- High River
- Hines Creek
- Hughenden
- Irricana
- La Crete
- Lac La Biche
- Lamont
- Lethbridge
- Lloydminster
- Longview
- Manning
- Marwayne
- Mayerthorpe
- McLennan
- Medicine Hat
- Meeting Creek
- Millet
- Onoway
- Peace River
- Rainbow Lake
- Red Deer
- Rosebud
- Sherwood Park
- Spruce Grove
- St. Albert
- Stand Off
- Tangent
- Trout Lake
- Vegreville
- Vermilion
- Wanham
- Wabasca
- Westlock
- Wetaskiwin

SPEAK OUT
ALBERTA STUDENT ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

Who We Spoke To

Like the *Speak Out* forums, the conference represented Alberta's diverse student body. We asked students a series of "getting to know you" questions, using an audience response system to collect responses anonymously. Once responses were submitted, results were shown using percentages and graphs. This process also allowed the students to become comfortable with the clickers for later in the facilitation process and for the feedback portion of the conference. Below is a summary of the demographic information collected. The complete results can be found on page 38.

30% of us are in grade 11.

87% of us use online social networks such as Facebook.

37% of us participated in a Speak Out forum in the fall or spring campaigns.

In our spare time, we hang out with friends, play sports and listen to music.

26% of us are in grade 12.

24% of us are in grade 10.

33% of us send more than 100 text messages every day!

20% of us are in grade 9.

31% of us are hanging out with our friends when we are not at school. Another 27% of us are playing sports.

61% of us travelled more than 200 kilometres (one way) to attend the conference!

78% of us own a cell phone.

What Happened

Students from across Alberta wishing to attend the conference were asked to submit an application form. In order to ensure that a diverse student population was represented at the conference, the *Speak Out* team encouraged all students to apply for the conference. The term "diverse student population" indicates a cross-section of students from grades 9 to 12, with differing academic goals and varied personal interests and abilities. This term is intended to denote a broad student voice. Of the students who applied from around the province, 191 attended and participated in the conference events and activities.

On the first day of the conference, students were welcomed by the Minister of Education; enjoyed a welcome banquet for all students, chaperones and youth volunteers; and also enjoyed Andy Thibodeau's keynote address. On the second day of the conference, the Minister of Education made opening remarks to the students. The day was focused on two goals: 1) generating priority themes based on possible solutions suggested by students and 2) developing recommendations for Alberta Education.

At the end of the conference, students had an opportunity to provide feedback on all the activities and events held during the inaugural conference. Feedback was given both electronically, with audience response system clickers, and through group discussion, which was recorded on a written evaluation form at each table.

The two goals of the conference were to:

1) generate priority themes based on possible solutions suggested by students and

2) develop recommendations for Alberta Education.

The Facilitation

Student participants were divided into 25 small working groups of six to eight students. These groups were randomly assigned to ensure that a diverse student voice was represented at each table. On each table was a cluster of student input generated from over 4,600 footprints and 3,800 discussion posts. This input was the foundation of the table discussions. Table leaders facilitated the conversation and helped students capture their input.

To achieve the first goal of the conference, students went through four rounds of refining the main themes from the student input presented on the tables. During the first round, students were asked to highlight the most important phrases or words on each piece of student input and discuss their reasoning. For the second round, students were randomly assigned to different tables. At the second table, they were asked to look at the previous group's highlights. Based on the highlighted phrases, the students were asked to draw pictures of a personal experience that could be represented by the highlighted phrase. As students drew pictures of their experiences, table leaders asked students to share their stories with the group. For the third round, students were randomly assigned to a third table and asked to look at the highlighted phrases and pictures previously captured, in order to formulate their own key themes to summarize the prior discussions. Students captured these themes by writing directly on the table, on any available space, then discussing them in groups. For the fourth round, students returned to the first tables and discussed the additional information that had been added by other students in rounds two and three. Through this discussion, students collectively generated one priority theme and five sub-themes that described the student input on each table.

Once all 25 tables submitted their priority themes, all themes were immediately entered into a computer, projected onto a screen, and circulated to students on a ballot form. Then, each student was asked to vote on his or her top three choices. Each student was given three adhesive dots, with each dot representing one vote. The students were asked to place their dots beside the themes most important to them. Once all the votes were placed, the *Speak Out* team collected each table's ballot form

and tallied up the votes. The top eight themes, based on highest number of votes, were presented back to students. We explained to students that these eight themes would be the basis for generating recommendations to present to Alberta Education.

Following a lunch and "energizer" break, the eight themes were divided among the tables for further discussion. The students worked together to develop two recommendations to address the student-generated theme they were presented with. During this discussion, students were encouraged to critique each other's ideas and discuss the impacts of their recommendations. Once each table submitted their top two recommendations, we presented all student-generated recommendations to the entire group. There were six to eight recommendations for each of the top eight themes. We then asked students to vote for their top choice in each of the eight categories, using their clickers. The voting results were instantly compiled and shared with students. We emphasized to the students the top three recommendations in each of the eight categories, based on highest number of votes. This last working session concluded the facilitation process for the day.

What We Heard

Through the faciiitation, the students at each table came up with a theme based on the student input, highlighted phrases, images and words on their table. The 25 student-generated themes were then gathered and submitted to students for their evaluation. The votes were counted and eight priority themes emerged. Students focused on these themes and produced draft recommendations. These student generated priority themes, subtopics and draft recommendations below are listed in order of importance as ranked by students.

1. Effective and Qualified Teaching

The subtopics or major components of this theme include:

- the quality of teaching
- the impact of teacher-student relationships
- teachers accepting suggestions from others (being open-minded)
- ensuring that there is a certain amount of time allotted for students to approach their teacher for extra help
- teachers keeping a positive attitude toward students
- teachers using different teaching methods
- assessing the flexibility and quality of teaching methods, the teachers, and the curriculum
- maintaining consistency between curriculum and exams
- creating unity between students and teachers
- ensuring that teachers are addressing student needs

Draft Recommendations:

"Government funding for teacher training, field trips, supplies and resources to promote interactions and relationships between students and teacher."

"Teachers should develop abilities in varied learning styles, classroom presence and preparedness."

2. Preparation for the Future

The subtopics or major components of this theme include:

- having access to career counselling and information about possibilities
- mentoring students—using specific information to guide them
- teaching life skills in every class
- having opportunities to follow your passion (e.g., career shadowing)
- building a compassionate community

Draft Recommendations:

"Create opportunities for job shadowing, peer mentoring and career counsellors, personality quizzes and resources. Enable students' discovery of passion and potential."

"A course is created (like RAP) for academic students that allows career exploration with a more flexible schedule than RAP."

3. Testing

The subtopics or major components of this theme include:

- making tests worth less and assignments worth more—creating balance
- having alternative testing
- having alternative credits (e.g., credits for out-of-school activities)
- comparing skills vs. grades—having marks on everything, not just assignments and tests

Draft Recommendations:

"No single test should be more than 30% of a student's grade."

"Testing becomes less standardized (allow alternatives)."

"Teachers collaborate to reduce pressure on tests by creating a relaxed environment and by scheduling tests to avoid overload."

4. Student Involvement

The subtopics or major components of this theme include:

- respect for student voice on things that matter (more than social activities)
- improving communication
- having student leadership
- student influence
- being able to evaluate and provide feedback on teachers, curriculum and learning experiences

Draft Recommendations:

"Increase student involvement through pep rallies, school activities and comment boxes for students."

"Make student conferences mandatory and held annually plus encourage community through school clubs with community professionals assisting/coaching."

"Make sure the information is readily accessible so that we can make an informed decision for what we want."

Student voice

"The conference was AMAZING! ... I have been to a lot of conference and this was one of the best ones. I loved how I had the opportunity to talk to people from all across Alberta."

"Speak out: Alberta listens."

5. Relevant Curriculum

The subtopics or major components of this theme include:

- making the curriculum relevant to real life
- providing more information for options for life after school
- having travelling options to see and experience things outside of school
- too much irrelevant volume/information in the curriculum
- having more options in programming

Draft Recommendations:

"There be less requirements forcing us to take classes we don't want or need and more choice and freedom to take what we want and like."

"There be less general subjects and more subjects covered in depth with more hands on activities and experiences."

6. Anti-Bullying

The subtopics or major components of this theme include:

- encourage acceptance and diversity
- increasing awareness
- prevention
- increasing self-confidence

Draft Recommendations:

"Schools use harsher punishment against bullies and teachers stand up against bullies rather than ignoring the situations."

"Schools take initiative not only to prevent harassment but promote self esteem and understanding diversity."

7. School atmosphere and environment

The subtopics or major components of this theme include:

- having the school psychologically and emotionally more friendly and appealing
- cultivating mutual understanding between teachers and students
- encouraging acceptance and sensitivity in the system using the curriculum
- making the school physically conducive to learning
- helping students to identify with their school through art and structure

Draft Recommendations:

"Allow students more choices, improve teacher enthusiasm and attitude and have the school year mimic the university year."

"Diverse length of class periods to accommodate student differences."

8. Healthy Lifestyles

The subtopics or major components of this theme include:

- promoting exercise, physical activity, and accessibility
- encouraging students to sleep a minimum of eight hours—students don't get enough sleep due to homework, jobs, sports and activities
- having healthy food choices in school and nutrition awareness
- sexual education awareness
- having a regular nurse at schools
- having after school sports teams
- assisting students with time management

Draft Recommendations:

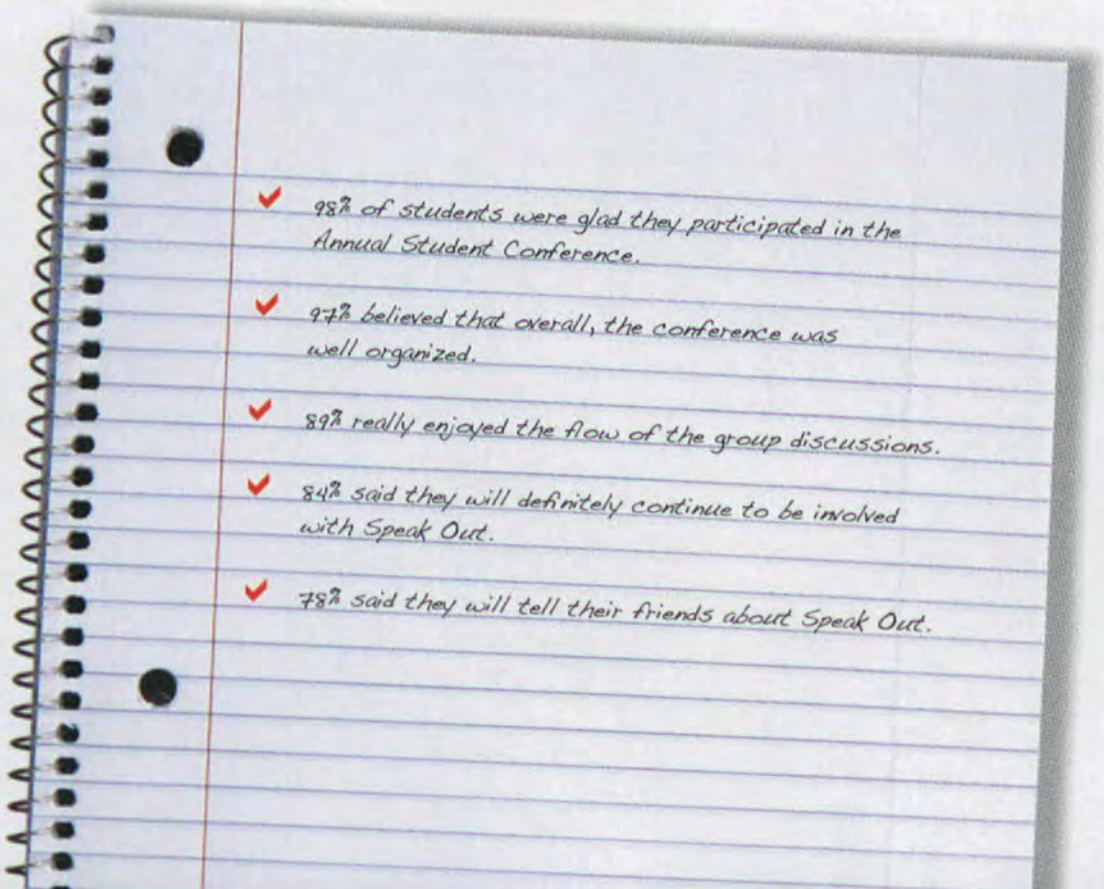
"Make healthy food available all day by keeping the cafeteria open or having healthy vending machines so everyone can eat healthy and feel better and be more focused at school."

"Incentives to play sports or physical activities."

"The schools need to have a health class to promote sexual education, hygiene and overall healthy lifestyle."

How We Did

At the end of the conference, we asked students a series of evaluation questions, using the audience response system to collect responses anonymously. Some of the responses are listed below:


✔ 98% of students were glad they participated in the Annual Student Conference.
✔ 97% believed that overall, the conference was well organized.
✔ 89% really enjoyed the flow of the group discussions.
✔ 84% said they will definitely continue to be involved with Speak Out.
✔ 78% said they will tell their friends about Speak Out.

Annual Student Conference Demographic Information

At the beginning of the Annual Student Conference, we asked students a series of "getting to know you" questions. We used an audience response system to collect responses anonymously. The following demographic percentages are based on an average of the responses collected from the 191 conference participants.

1) I am a:

Guy – 36%
Girl – 64%

2) I am in grade:

9 – 20%
10 – 24%
11 – 30%
12 – 26%

3) I have a cell phone:

Yes – 78%
No – 22%

4) How many text messages do you send on an average day?

None – 25%
1–49 – 24%
50–99 – 18%
100–149 – 11%
+150 – 22%

5) Do you have a part-time job during the school year?

Yes – 51%
No – 49%

6) What is your favourite thing to do in your spare time?

Watch TV – 4.4%
Play sports/work out – 26.6%
Read – 8.2%
Play video games – 4.9%
Hang out with friends – 31.0%
Hang out online – 6.5%
Listen to music – 3.8%
Talk on the phone – 0.5%
Play an instrument – 6.5%
Other – 7.6%

7) Are you on Facebook or MySpace?

Yes – 87%
No – 13%

8) How many "friends" or "contacts" do you have on Facebook or MySpace etc.?

None – 10%
1–99 – 16%
100–249 – 34%
250–499 – 28%
+500 – 12%

9) Did you attend one of the *Speak Out* forums held in Fall 2008 and Spring 2009?

Yes – 23%
No – 77%

10) Have you had the chance to check out **www.speakout.alberta.ca**?

Yes – 62%
No – 38%

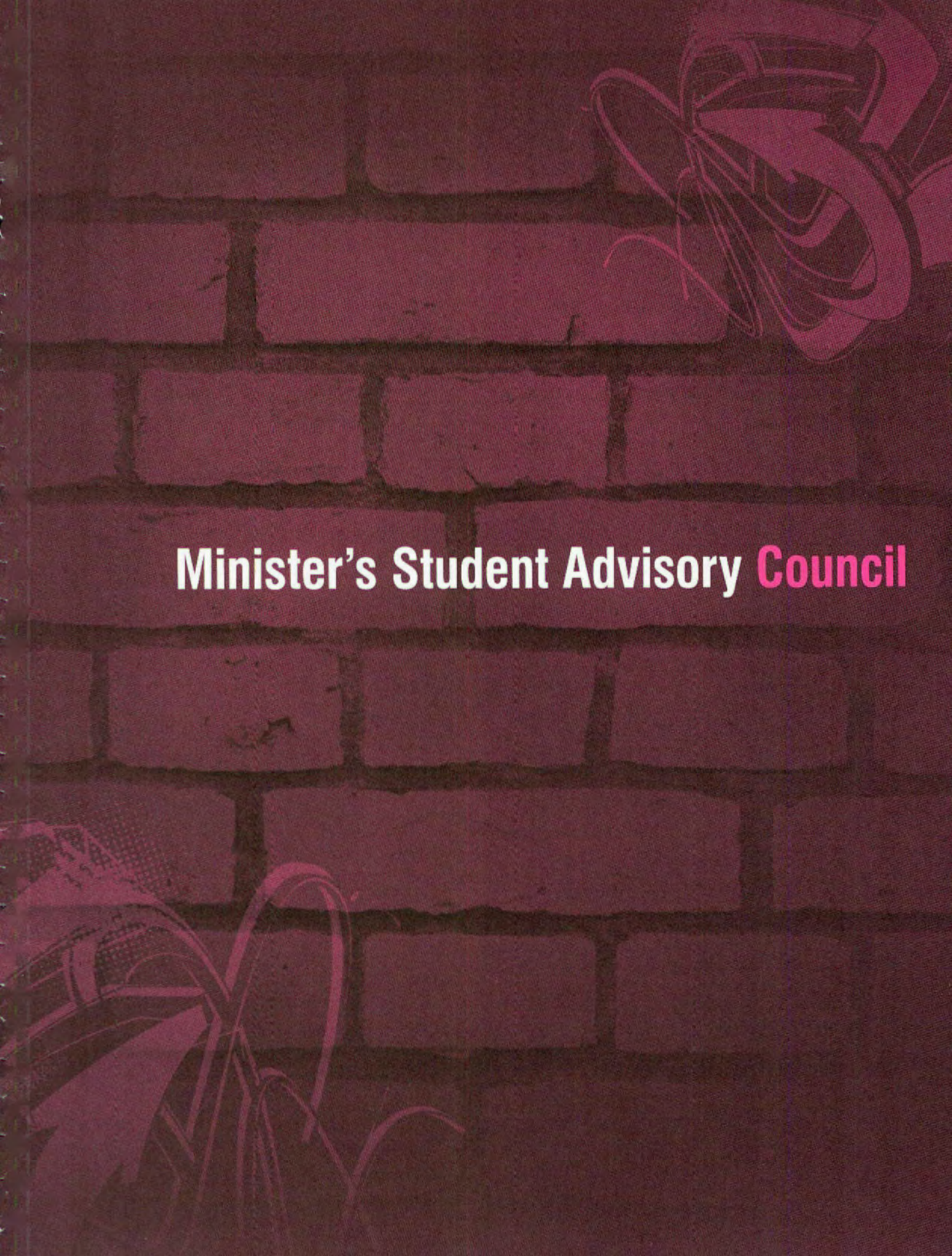
11) Are you a registered user on **www.speakout.alberta.ca**?

Yes – 36%
No – 64%

12) To get to Edmonton for the conference, how far did you have to travel one way?

0–99 km – 25%
100–199 km – 14%
200–299 km – 11%
300–399 km – 18%
400–499 km – 7%
500–599 km – 11%
More than 600 km! – 14%

> "I must commend you on an extremely good conference... Your keynote speaker was by far one of the best speakers for the target audience that I have had heard in my entire life. And I'm an educator who has been in the profession for 29 years and trust me, I've seen a lot of speakers... I commend you for choosing him and for making this whole *Speak Out* initiative possible for our children in Alberta."


Minister's Student Advisory Council

Minister's Student Advisory Council

The concept of *Speak Out* – the Alberta Student Engagement Initiative, was announced in the February 2008 throne speech. The Minister of Education's Student Advisory Council explores ways to improve education in Alberta, and members act as ambassadors of *Speak Out* in their communities and schools. Council members were selected based on their diversity of backgrounds, opinions and experiences. The selection process involved reviewing applications and conducting telephone interviews. Alberta Education reviewed the short list of candidates, and final approval was granted by the Minister of Education.

"It is crucial that we speak directly to students so we get a more informed perspective of our education system as a whole," said Hancock. "Encouraging students to speak openly and freely is integral to shaping future education initiatives in our province."

(Excerpt from May 4, 2009, Government of Alberta news release)

The Minister's Student Advisory Council consists of 24 young people between the ages of 14 and 19. The province has been divided into 10 zones, most of which have two members. The Edmonton and Calgary zones, given their greater populations, have four members respectively. Every attempt is made to have representation from each zone. Council members are appointed to serve a one-year term, commencing in August. Council membership may be renewed for a maximum of two years or until the member ages out. The council application process and selection is annual. All interested youth must submit an application, including current council members seeking renewal.

What They Do

Throughout their term, council members support the elements of *Speak Out*. Their responsibilities include participating in online discussions on the interactive *Speak Out* website with students from across the province; planning and hosting a *Speak Out* forum in their school, community or zone; and assisting with recruitment and facilitation at the Annual Student Conference. Council members also meet with the Minister to share input and feedback from their *Speak Out* forums, and provide valuab e input on proposed strategies brought forward by the Ministry of Education.

Through this initiative, and specifically through participation on the council, members develop leadership, facilitation and communication skills. With the support and assistance of a local mentor and the *Speak Out* team, council members network with local authorities and decision makers. Lastly, council members provide ongoing feedback on *Speak Out*, including the website, promotional products, recruitment strategies and advertising campaigns.

The Minister's Student Advisory Council takes an ever-increasing leadership role in *Speak Out* to ensure that the student voice continues to be sought and considered.

Council members:

- Are Ambassadors for *Speak Out*
- Host a *Speak Out* Forum
- Share input
- Provide feedback

2009-2010 Minister's Student Advisory Council

Alex M.

Age: 17
Grade: 11
Zone: I – Camrose
Hometown: Czar

Amanda A.

Age: 18
Grade: 12
Zone: C – Calgary
Hometown: Calgary

Andrew P.

Age: 16
Grade: 11
Zone: B – Fort McMurray
Hometown: Wabasca

Andrew W.

Age: 16
Grade: 10
Zone: H – St. Paul
Hometown: Lloydminster

Anne-Marie M.

Age: 16
Grade: 10
Zone: D – Red Deer
Hometown: Red Deer

Bethany F.

Age: 15
Grade: 10
Zone: J – Westlock
Hometown: Westlock

Breanne F.

Age: 18
Grade: 12
Zone: H – St. Paul
Hometown: Lac La Biche

Cheyanne V.

Age: 17
Grade: 11
Zone: I – Camrose
Hometown: Hughenden

Dwight W.

Age: 19
Grade: 12
Zone: F – Lethbridge
Hometown: Standoff

George B.

Age: 16
Grade: 10
Zone: A – Grande Prairie
Hometown: Eaglesham

Jacey A.

Age: 14
Grade: 9
Zone: A – Grande Prairie
Hometown: High Level

James F.

Age: 18
Grade: 12
Zone: G – Medicine Hat
Hometown: Hanna

Joshua B.

Age: 17
Grade: 12
Zone: E – Edmonton
Hometown: Edmonton

Justin N.

Age: 19
Grade: 12
Zone: E – Edmonton
Hometown: Edmonton

Kristina H.

Age: 16
Grade: 11
Zone: C – Calgary
Hometown: Calgary

Malika L.

Age: 17
Grade: 12
Zone: E – Edmonton
Hometown: Edmonton

Miranda R.

Age: 15
Grade: 9
Zone: C – Calgary
Hometown: High River

Ryan H.

Age: 17
Grade: 12
Zone: B – Fort McMurray
Hometown: Caslan

Sandy X.

Age: 15
Grade: 9
Zone: E – Edmonton
Hometown: Edmonton

Shane S.

Age: 14
Grade: 9
Zone: C – Calgary
Hometown: Calgary

Siobhán S.

Age: 15
Grade: 10
Zone: F – Lethbridge
Hometown: Lethbridge

Tahliah D.

Age: 15
Grade: 10
Zone: D – Red Deer
Hometown: Red Deer County

Tanea J.

Age: 15
Grade: 9
Zone: G – Medicine Hat
Hometown: Medicine Hat

Zach B.

Age: 18
Grade: 11
Zone: I – Camrose
Hometown: Meeting Creek

What's Next?

What's Next?

During this launch year, *Speak Out* focused on reaching out to students and letting them know not only that they have a voice and can have an impact, but that their input is critical and we need to hear them.

As *Speak Out* enters its second year, the team will continue to reach out to Alberta's youth, encouraging them to share their ideas and to apply for both the conference and the council. The interactive and fully moderated website, with its growing membership, will continue to contribute to this valuable conversation. Essential small group discussions will occur again around the province at *Speak Out* forums planned for October and November 2009 and February and March 2010. The second Annual Student Conference is tentatively scheduled for May 14 to 16, 2010, in Edmonton. The Minister's Student Advisory Council will continue to work closely with Alberta Education, meeting several times this coming year.

Most importantly, these council members will take a leadership role by hosting their own *Speak Out* forums in their schools or communities, using a step-by-step DVD toolkit. This DVD toolkit has been designed to ensure that anyone can host a *Speak Out* forum any time and anyplace. This approach will not only build local capacity and local engagement, but also enable more students to find their voice and speak out. Anyone interested in hosting their own *Speak Out* forum can contact the *Speak Out* team to receive their free DVD toolkit and supplies.

In addition to gathering the student voice, *Speak Out* is turning its attention to sharing that critical voice with the educational system, including government, universities, school boards, superintendents, principals and teachers. As we work together to improve the educational opportunities for youth in Alberta, we must recognize the value of that student perspective and commit to continuing the conversation, both locally and provincially.

> "You have no idea the impact you can have right now. You have no idea of the impact your words can have. You have a voice. Use it. Speak Out."

Acknowledgements

Speak Out – the Alberta Student Engagement Initiative sincerely appreciates the support, guidance and leadership offered by the Minister of Education's Office, Deputy Minister's Office, Strategic Services Assistant Deputy Minister's Office, Alberta Education's Executive Team, Legislative Services, Communications and Student Engagement Committee.

Speak Out gratefully acknowledges its sponsors, Culture and Community Spirit, the Youth Advisory Panel and the Alberta Prevention of Bullying Youth Committee.

A special note of appreciation to ALL Alberta Education staff who collaborated on various elements of the initiative. In particular, *Speak Out* would like acknowledge staff in the following areas:

- Career Technology Studies
- Curriculum
- Distributed Learning
- Field Services
- Financial and Administrative Services
- First Nations, Métis and Inuit Services
- French Language Services
- Information and Technology Management
- Inspiring Education
- International Education Services
- Learner Assessment
- Learning Resources Centre
- Performance Measurement and Reporting
- Policy and Planning
- Program Resources
- Records Management
- School Improvement
- School Technology
- Special Education
- Strategic Business Services
- System Improvement
- Teacher Development and Certification
- Web Services
- Workforce Planning

Finally, the biggest thank you of all must go to the students in Alberta who have enthusiastically contributed to the website, participated in *Speak Out* forums, attended the Annual Student Conference and applied for the Minister's Student Advisory Council. Thank you for speaking out and sharing your perspectives and your voice.